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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this curriculum unit is to help parents equip their children with a viable attitude toward living a fulfilling life which includes an acceptance of death as well as an examination of their own fears and feelings toward death. The family is seen as the major educator of children in matters of interpreting and understanding the life cycle. Parents become the key instruments in shaping and molding their children's awareness of death within the context of their own belief. Children at various cognitive age levels will view death quite differently. Even within each developmental stage children are unique individuals who grow and develop at different rates. Open and honest communication between parents and children is imperative. Parents can and, it is suggested, should incorporate an ecological perspective of the life cycle into their children's developmental growth processes. This can be done through informal discussions, family projects, suggested readings, or family activities. The ecological perspective will give parents the needed confidence to communicate with their children on topics related to the birth-life-death cycle. (Author/RH)

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FAMILY CENTERED UNIT FOR HELPING CHILDREN BECOME AWARE OF DEATH

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Introduction:

Can a parent successfully help their child develop a positive attitude toward death which also includes a perspective of life? Many parents are eager to explain and discuss topics related to a multitude of subjects with their children. Even a few parents are brave enough to address themselves to the question, "Where do babies come from?"

Unfortunately, few parents feel comfortable discussing the topic of death with their children. It has become a forbidden subject shrouded in the unknown (Miller and Ozga, 1973). In a study conducted by Schneidman, it was pointed out that not only was death rarely discussed within the immediate family circle, but it also created emotional discomfort, and anxiety among family members (1971). Even though death is as natural as birth, the family avoids facing the inexcapable experience (McKissack, 1974). From early childhood on, parents rarely discuss or openly talk with their children about death. Few people ever consider death, instead it is viewed as a personal threat to the "finiteness of human experience" (Fochtman, 1974).

No human being lives in a social vacuum protected from the joys, hardships, and sorrows created by the continuing cycle of birth, life, and eventual death. Each individual continually interacts with various natural, human and technological environments.

A major reason the family unit has difficulty discussing death with other family members is because there has been little prior experience in dealing with death (Goldberg, 1973). Several generations ago, the management of death was a family function, which gave old and young alike an awareness of this natural phenomenon. It was very natural for a person to die in the warm and familiar environment of the home (Doyle, 1977). An awareness of death has been removed as a family function as relatives and friends die in the remote confines of hospitals

and nursing homes with few visits from loved ones. This separation and avoidance of death has caused the family to deal with this natural phenomenon by relying on myths and mysteries as coping mechanisms (Pattison, 1976).

Throughout history and across cultures, the family has been a key instrument in shaping and molding its member's awareness of the life cycle which includes death (Paolucci, Bubolz, and Rainey, 1976). This has been accomplished through interpersonal communication within the family. The family can choose to deny or work to incorporate death into the natural process of life, rather than view death as a taboo topic.

The purpose of this curriculum unit is to help parents equip their children with a viable attitude toward living a fulfilling life which includes an acceptance of death as well as an examination of their own fears and feelings toward death. This program envisions the family as the "center of learning for living."

The curriculum guide could be used for training sessions with parents. Information and communication skills would help parents discuss death openly as a natural process of life. Groups where this program could be initiated would include extension homemaker clubs, church organized groups, parent-teacher association sessions, and adult education classes.

Family Ecological Framework:

The family is seen as a human system made up of subsystems of individual family members when viewed in an ecosystem perspective. These subsystems of family members interact with each other and outside environments. The ability of the family to interpret and process information obtained from other family members and the environment determines how successfully the family unit copes with life. The family is viewed as a complex network of interrelated component parts which attempt to act in a stable manner over a period of time.

Using the ecological perspective it is evident that children do not live in a world in which they interact only with their parents. Children continually

interface and receive information from the human, natural and regulatory environments (friends, school mates, relatives, education, church, mass media, and nature). Children turn to their parents for security in the hope of finding meaning in new events that are beyond their present and limited experiences (Jackson, 1965). As children become aware of the surrounding environments, it is only a matter of time before they encounter events which will raise the question of death.

Whether the event is a national disaster in which thousands of people loose their lives or a child's pet dies, parents must openly and honestly be willing to answer and discuss any questions concerning death children may have. As Paolucci points out, functional communication which is stated clearly and honestly has less likelihood of being confused, misinterpreted, or exaggerated (1977). Both the sender and the receiver will be receptive to feedback as they become aware of each other's needs. If the parent is afraid to openly face the topic of death a type of noncommunication could be experienced by the parent and child. The child may perpetuate the myths and fears passed on by his parents, look elsewhere for answers or try to explain death by relying on his own personal experience in the make-believe world. No matter what the situation, the child needs the parent's understanding and support as he lacks experience concerning the life cycle.

World Ecological View - Cycle of Birth and Death:

Individuals must view death in a very broad perspective. Not only must parents and children envision the life cycle taking place within the confines of the human environment, but must also see its implications in the natural and regulatory environment. The natural environment includes those systems which encompass the biophysical sphere. This contains the land, air, space, water, plants, wildlife, animals, sun, and those natural resources which help support life. It is easy to envision the natural cycle of birth and death within the

natural environment. An example of the cycle of birth and death is the tree as it goes through the changing seasons. During the spring the trees begin to sprout new rich green leaves. As spring becomes summer the leaves grow to their full size. Heading into fall, the leaves begin to loose their color and finally fall off the trees. During the winter when the ground is covered with snow, the trees lay dormant waiting for spring to give new birth.

Another example would be the cycle of birth and death of our natural resources. For hundreds of millions of years, the earth gave birth to the fossil fuel, coal. As this non-renewable resource is now being extracted from the earth's crust in huge quantities, other sources of energy are being sought. The depletion of coal has given birth to new sources of energy such as solar and nuclear power.

The regulatory environment includes those systems created by man to maintain and give order to the human and the natural environment. These environments would include the educational, political, judicial, religious and economic systems. An example of the birth-death cycle would be the creation and discussion and acceptance or rejection of a bill in Congress.

Within the human, natural, and regulatory environments, an individual can view almost any phenomenon within the birth-life-death cycle. To illustrate this point the Gyroscope Ecological Model will be used which shows the family system revolving within the counter-revolving natural, human support, and regulatory environment (Transparency 1).

The ecological framework helps parents discuss birth-life cycle with more understanding. There are several things they can do. These would include a series of family centered activites as follows:

a. Family field trips exploring fields, timber, and forests which could be made part of a family picnic.

b. Family projects of growing plants from seeds, or having the child take care of an aquarium or terrarium where the balance of life and death

may be observed.

c. Read with your child or suggest to them different books which would give a perspective of the birth-life-death cycle. (See Table A in Appendix for bibliography list broken down by age and cognitive development).

Process of Life: Everyone Views Death Differently:

Every child is an unique individual. They will grow and develop both mentally and physically at different rates. The child's maturity cannot always be gauged by their physical age, alone. As the child's sphere of awareness expands, individual experiences broaden. Not every child reacts similiarly to a particular event. They will interpret and react to an event in their own unique fashion.

As Jackson mentions, "when a crisis like death comes along in life, the interpretation of it has to be geared to the special characteristics of the child." (1965, p. 51). Some children will show little concern for such events and that is fine, while others may need parental support. No matter what the case, parents should try to cope with their child's reactions on the child's own level. A child cannot develop a healthy mental attitude toward death if adults depend on the denial of tragedy instead of showing them an honest and open acknowledgement of the life cycle. Since the many fears of death a child may have are learned from their parents, gaining an understanding of the life cycle within an ecological perspective can help serve to reduce fears and misunderstandings about death.

Knowing that each child will interpret and view an event or happening differently, it is important to help the child understand his own feelings toward the life cycle. The child's ability to cope with a particular aspect or event concerning death may be facilitated if prior parent-child communication on the topic takes place. Mills emphasizes that such discussions should

introduce the subject generally and in terms the child can understand (1976).

Realizing that age and cognitive development must be considered in understanding the child's comprehension of the meaning of death gives parents an opportunity to help their children grow both intellectually and emotionally while allowing them to express their feelings in their own way. In studying children's attitudes toward death and dying, Koocher classifies children according to their cognitive state by using Piaget's framework of cognitive functioning (1974). In combining these cognitive levels with an approximate age classification, the following categories can be used (Transparency 2).

1. Sensory Reaction (birth to 4). The child can sense a loss but cannot understand the concept of birth or death. Mainly the child is concerned with present emotions and feelings. The child has little understanding of time. At this stage, the child needs love and understanding from his parents. No attempt needs to be made to explain or conceptualize the life cycle except to give the child a positive feeling toward nature and life.
2. Fantasy Reasoning (5 to 9 years). Children at this stage become aware of both life and death including the sorrows and joys they can bring. In observing living things and the finality of death this age group can rarely envision the universality of death. Death becomes personified by egocentric reasoning or magical thinking as they might begin to attribute such natural phenomenon to the boggey man or the angel of death.
3. Factual Reasoning (8 to 12 years). During this period most children witness or observe, the death of a pet or perhaps a relative. Not only does the child begin to see some specific causes of death but also wonders about an after life. Most children in this group apply specific causes or factual events to death. Death to them is still a distant and far off phenomenon.

4. Abstract Reasoning (13 to 18 years). There is a realization that death occurs to all living beings. Life and death are viewed as part of a natural process of aging, sickness or general physical deterioration.

No matter what cognitive age level a child is at, it is extremely important for the parent to help the child understand death which is fundamental in the developmental growth of any child. When communicating with the child it is necessary to be honest and open while answering questions clearly. By being afraid to face the topic of death openly can often cause confusion, fear or rejection on the part of the child. Perhaps the most important aspect of helping your child understand death is to listen to your child. If a child asks a question concerning death, listen to him to find out what he knows and does not know.

Each individual is part of a never ending process:

The life of a person is a very broad street, beginning at birth and continuing beyond death. (Transparency 3) An individual does not live his life in a vacuum with no interaction with others. Rather his life is part of a continuous cycle, which includes the natural environment, the regulatory environments, and human support environments.

Within the continuous cycle of the natural environment, a child lives and continues to grow with nature. (Transparency 4) They begin to interact with the natural environment by breathing the air, then learn to walk on the land. Later, they experience life by watching birds fly, seeing flowers grow, and viewing the beauty in nature around them. They learn to experience many feelings toward the natural environment. The natural environment provides the very sustance for living. Without the natural environment, survival would be impossible.

Within the natural environment, a child learns to experience the regulatory environments (Transparency 5). He begins to interact with the regulatory

environment by going with his parents to church, shopping, to school, etc. But as he continues to grow, he begins to interact as an individual with other environments. His concept of life is formed from interaction with natural and regulatory environments. "I" begin to see myself as an individual within a larger framework." The child experiences a sense of continual growth. Memories make things, and events live. The child may remember a picnic (although the picnic is long over) or he may remember a pet which has died (the pet still lives in his memories). Events are not static but continue through memories.

As the child reacts and interacts with the natural and regulatory environments, he also becomes acquainted with his family and other individuals and grows as he interacts with them. His growth process is fulfilled as he develops a self identity from his interaction with all systems. Memories are a large part of these interactions. Physical deaths, social deaths, natural deaths are all a part of the memory system of each child as he matures into adulthood.

Life is not static, an individual does not stand still, rather he interacts with the total environmental system. Parents have the opportunity to help children view death not as an end, but as an acknowledgement of life. Death is a small part of the continuous cycle, part of a larger reality. As death occurs, it leaves memories through accomplishments, through reproduction, through interactions and through living and dying.

Positive communication between parent and child:

Helping children face death, also helps family members look at their own feelings toward death. Each individual within a family can strengthen and help each person face life through the death of a loved one.

There are many positive aspects of communication with children about death and dying. A selected few are listed here:

1. Be objective, not technical, or complex - this can be very confusing to the child. One should try to help the child deal with simple facts.

The age of the child will effect the amount of information a child should receive.

2. Parents should mourn with the child - Supporting each other will help both, otherwise the child may believe you are hiding something.
3. Looking at death together - Helps families share their hopes, fears, ideas, believes and faith for the future. Death is a test for the family to re-examine their philosophy toward life.
4. Help a child establish a viewpoint toward life. A realistic view of the person who has died is very important. It is also important to help the child establish a memory, and not hold onto the past but look into the future.
5. Mourning with the child - includes not grieving for the dead person but accepting the loss while grieving for a lost relationship.
6. Expression of feelings - grieving, crying and tears are not a show of weakness, rather they are an expression of sadness or pent up emotions released from pressures.

Many negative aspects of communication exist with myths and the ways people have tried to help children cope with death. Some of these negative solutions are given below:

1. The phrase "Johnny went to sleep" tends to make the child afraid to go to sleep, afraid he to will die.
2. God took away Johnny because he loved him. If blame is placed on God, the child may grow up fearing God and loos trust in God.
3. Never use death related threats, like the boogey man will get you, or "clean up your room or I will kill you". These phrases suggest death as something to dread and a terrible thing to happen to a person.

4. Fairy tales of why a person has died gives a child false ideas about death. The child should be told as honestly as possible the reason for the death occurring.
5. Do not shield the child from death. This may cause the child to believe he was responsible for the occurrence.
6. Do not tell a child that a person has gone on a long journey. When the person does not return, the child may believe he caused the person to leave.
7. Do not create guilt feelings for the child. Sayings, such as, "You will be the death of me yet" are causes of guilt build-ups. If a parent actually does die, the child may believe he was the cause of the death.
8. Do not use expressions, like "Drop dead". Any association with death or dying should not be used in talking with a child other than in an actual situation of the death of a pet, person, or other.

Positive communication between parent and child is very important for the child to have a positive feeling toward life and death (Transparency 6). Gordon states that people send messages to receivers with the following responses, "I" messages cause persons to feel good and build healthy relationships and are less threatening. "You" messages tend to make a person feel rejected, put down, blamed for an action. In a parent-child relationship, the "you" messages can terminate a relationship and produce negative feelings toward each other.

Examples of the "you" message are as follows:

Child - Why did my pet doggy die?

Parent - You know better than to bother me now.

Child - What is wrong with Grandpa?

Parent - You just would not understand!

Child - Can I help Uncle David to get better?

Parent - You know you cannot help!

Child - Can I play with my friends now?

Parent - I cannot spare the time now, you'll be the death of me yet!

Child - I found a dead bird, can we bury it?

Parent - Don't you touch that dirty thing!

All of the preceding messages have been reanswered with "I" messages from the parents, which helps the child have positive feelings about the situation and theirself.

Child - Why did my pet die?

Parent - Let's sit down and talk about it, while I explain what happened to your puppy.

Child - What's wrong with grandpa?

Parent - I am upset because he is so sick, but Grandpa has done many fun things for us to remember.

Child - Can I help Uncle David to get better?

Parent - I don't know what we can do, except to visit him and let him know how much we care, the doctor is helping Uncle David.

Child - Can I play with my friends now?

Parent - I can't spare the time now because I have to prepare dinner, but we can arrange for you to play with your friends after dinner.

Child - I found a dead bird, can we bury it?

Parent - I will help you bury the birdie if you will find a box.

Summary:

A family centered unit for helping children become aware of death is not so much instruction on death as it is an educational understanding of life. For parents to help their children view death within the broader ecological perspective is to give their children a total picture of the environmental network of nature. Such an understanding gives children a larger reality of life and death as they find joy and happiness in nature.

This paper has emphasized the following:

1. The family is the major educator of its offspring in matters of interpreting and understanding the life cycle. Parents become the key instruments in shaping and molding their children's awareness of death within the context of their own beliefs.
2. Children at various cognitive age levels will view death quite differently. Even within each developmental stage children are unique individuals who grow and develop at different rates.
3. Open and honest communication is imperative. This helps the child share their own feelings of the life cycle in their own way giving the child an opportunity to grow and develop naturally.
4. Parents can and should incorporate an ecological perspective of the life cycle into their children's developmental growth processes. This can be done through informal discussions, family projects, suggested reading, or family activities.

Kubler-Ross emphasizes that children who are given the opportunity to express and discuss their feelings of death openly are more likely to view death more calmly and serenely (1975). The ecological perspective will give parents the needed confidence to communicate with their children on topics related to the birth-life-death cycle.

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TABLE A

Selected fiction for parent - child discussions:

1. Fantasy Reasoning (5 to 9 years)

Abbot, Sarah. Old Dog. New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegen, 1972.

Borak, Barbara. Someone Small. New York: Harper and Row, Inc., 1969.

Brown, Margaret Wise. The Dead Bird. Reading, Mass.: Young Scott Books, 1965.

De Paola, Thomas, Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs, New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1973.

Dobrin, Arnold. Scot! New York: Scholastic, 1971.

Kantrowity, Mildred. When Violet Died. New York: Parents Magazine Press, 1973.

2. Factual Reasoning (8 to 12 years)

Alcott, Louisa May. Little Men or Little Women, originally published in 1871 and 1869 respectively.

Armstrong, William. Sounder. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.

Buck, Pearl S. The Big Wave. New York: John Day, 1952.

Martin, Patricia Miles. John Fitzgerald Kennedy. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1964.

Wagner, Jane. J.T. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1969.

Warburg, Sandol Stoddard. Growing Time. Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969.

3. Abstract Reasoning (13 to 18 years)

Bach, Richard. Jonathon Livingston Seagull. New York: MacMillan Co., 1970.

Bolt, Robert. A Man for All Seasons. New York: Random House, 1960.

Buck, Pearl S. The Good Earth. New York: John Day Co., 1931.

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Saint-Exupery, Antoine de. The Little Prince. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1943.

Segal, Eric. Love Story. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.

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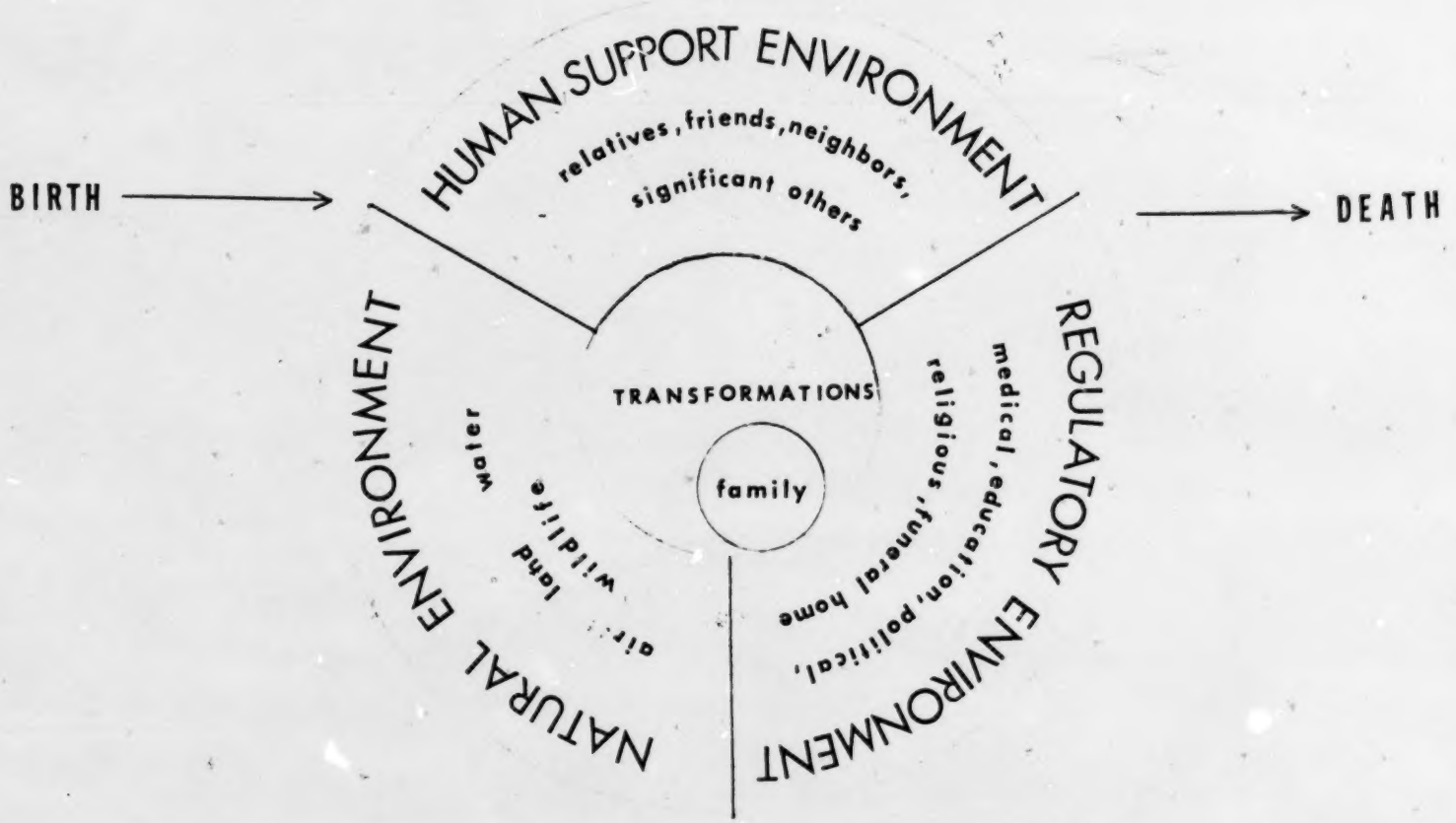
GYROSCOPE ECOLOGICAL MODEL



Sensory

Fantasy

Factual

Abstract

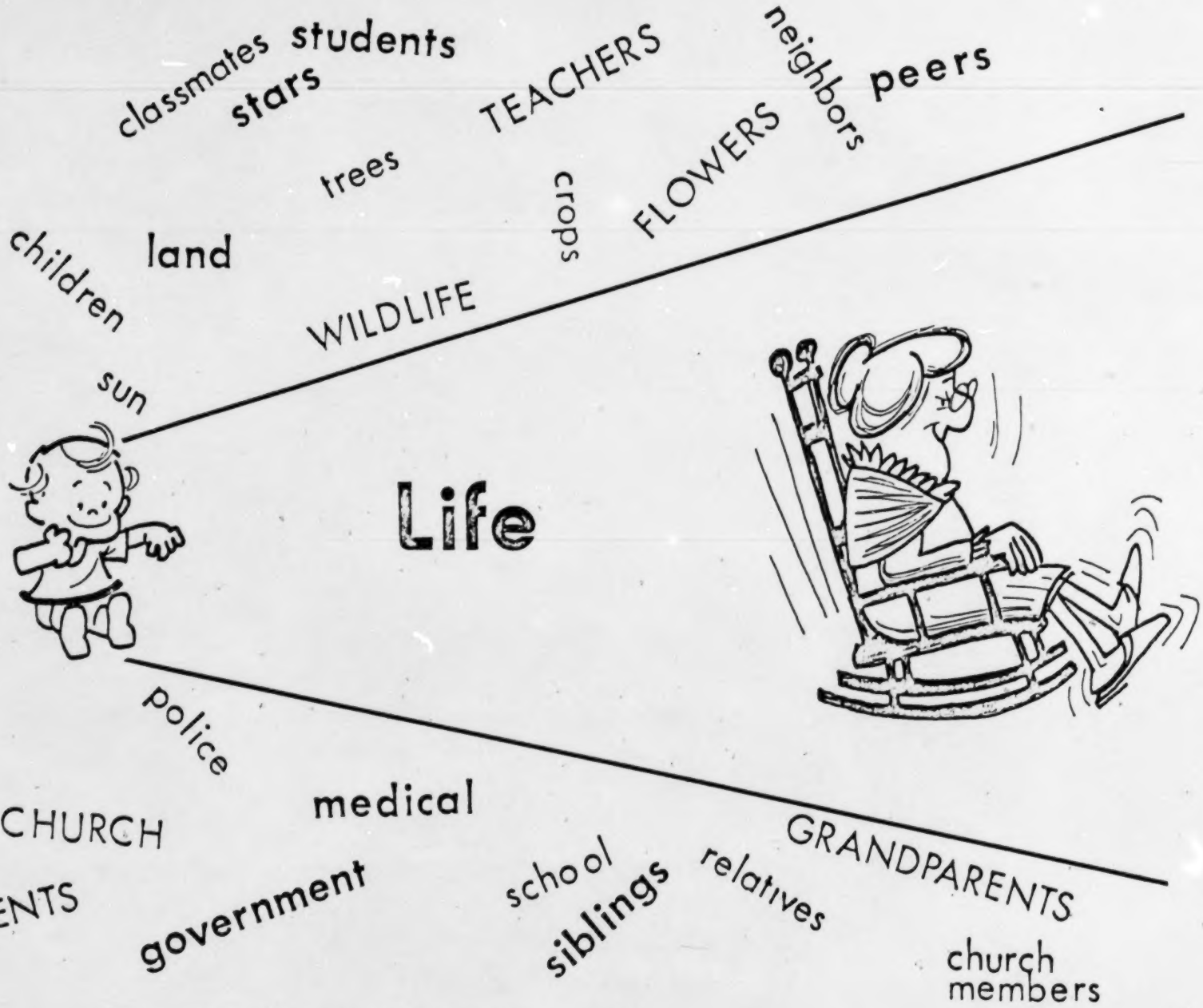
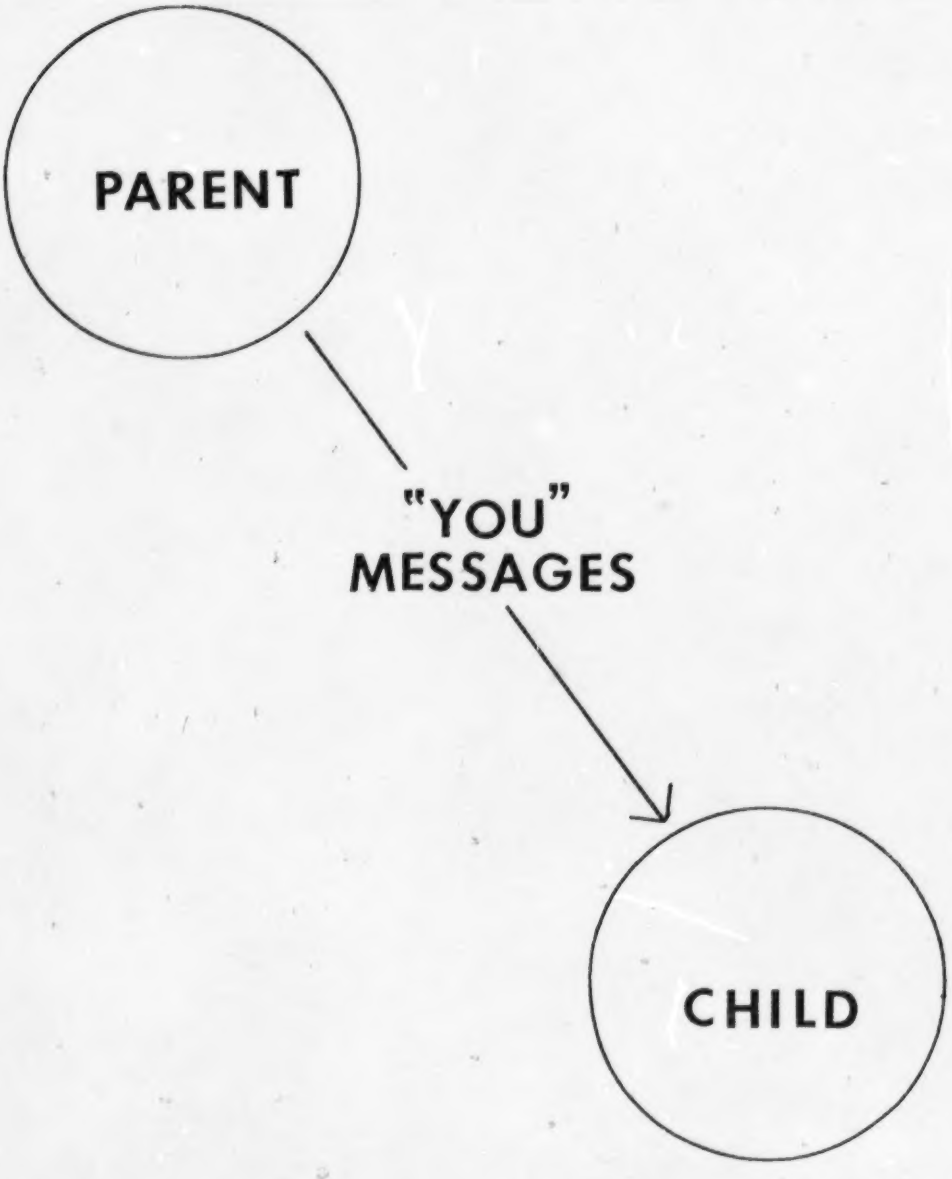


FIGURE 2: Life Span Interactions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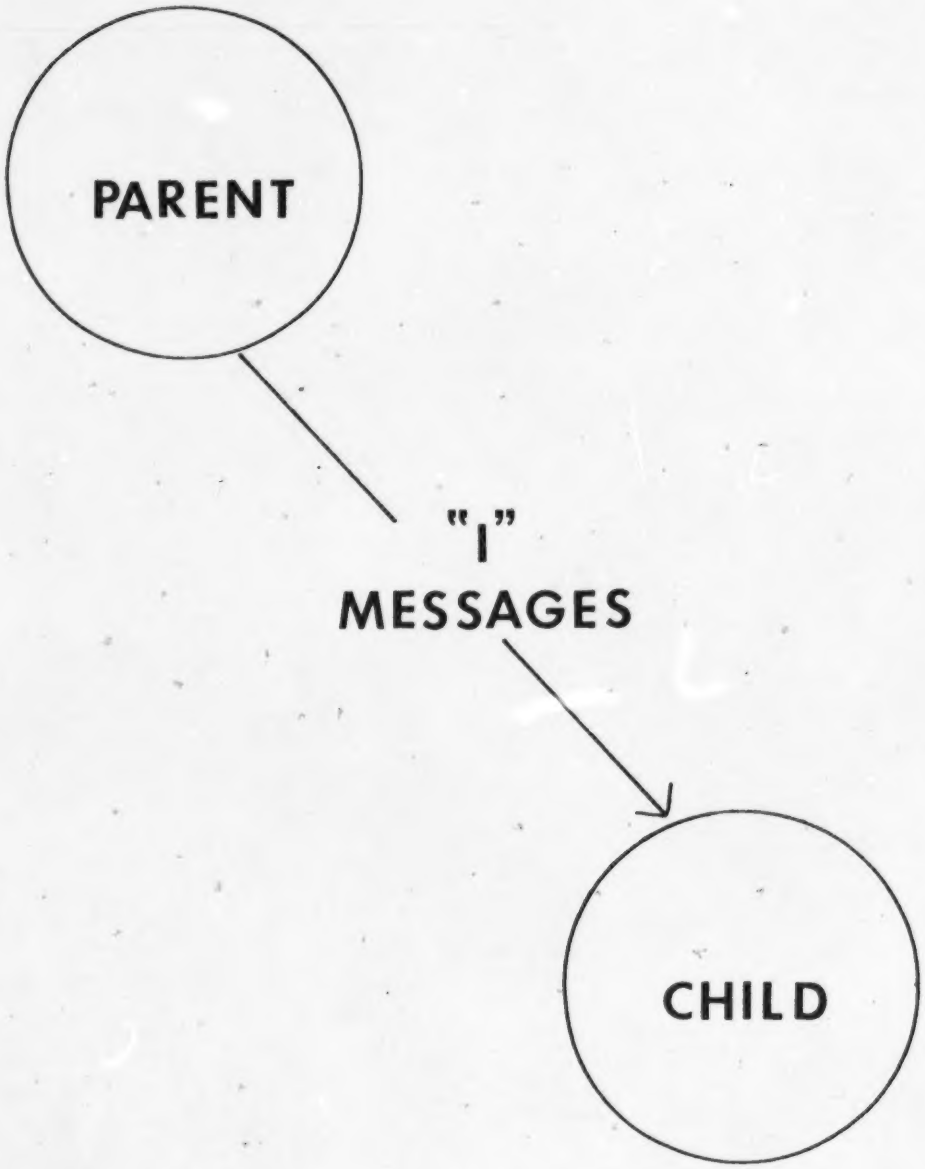
"YOU"
MESSAGES
CHILD


PARENT
"I"
MESSAGES
CHILD